

Tiny huskies big stars on canine circuit

By PAT O'HARA
Northern Mirror

The first time you see one, you're tempted to look for the wind-up key in back. Of course, you'd need to hook up 50 more for the race to Nome, but wherever they go, these tiny sled dog wannabes steal the show and the hearts of their admirers.

For nearly 20 years, Wasilla resident Linda Spurlin, along with her husband Rick, has been developing a uniquely Alaskan breed of dog, a miniature husky she calls Kille Kai. The Spurlins derived the name from an Eskimo word meaning "small dog."

These Lilliputian canines retain the distinctive facial masks of the traditional Siberian and Malamute along with a loyal and friendly disposition.

Toys weigh in at only 10 pounds, and miniatures go up to 19. But in either size, these racoon-faced bantams make ideal companions for people who love the Alaskan husky but don't have room for the Iditarod version.

Although these doggy deficits pack neatly into campers and motor homes, they literally stop traffic on the road. Twice, the Spurlins have driven to Colorado and Texas with their pets. "But every campground, everywhere we stayed, I couldn't cook, we couldn't do anything because so many people were crowded around the truck." Finally the Spurlins avoided campgrounds altogether just to get some rest.

Spurlin advertises only by word of mouth but still has a waiting list before each litter is born, despite the \$250 price tag. She also requires each buyer to sign a spaying/neutering contract so she can control the breeding. She keeps two decades worth of files on every puppy she's ever sold on her personal computer.

People continue to guess about the ingredients of the breed. "But," says Spurlin, "it's like Grandma's secret recipe you don't want to give away."

Many people assume she's used either chihuahua or fox, chuckles Spurlin, although "there's never been either one."

As far as she knows, Spurlin is the only breeder in the country producing miniature huskies. "I think it's a wonderful idea and there ought to be somebody else doing it, but if there is, we've never found out about it."

So far, she's sold dogs in nine different states, and her answering machine regularly takes calls from the Lower '48.

The American Kennel Club does not recognize the Klee Kai, although Spurlin has attempted to be accepted by a rare breed club. "If we could get recognized, they could be shown at sanctioned dog shows. But I sure don't have any trouble selling them, so I don't much care if they're recognized or not."

Despite her success, Spurlin has yet to make a profit on her 20-year venture. In fact, she's never yet broke even on costs. Last year she did come "really close. If I were just out



photo by Ron Caldwell

Annie, six years old, and Pepsi, four months, will never be a match for Flag, Summer Spurlin's red and white and blue-eyed cat.

to make money, I wouldn't have tried to create a new breed."

Instead, she pulls out a photo of a 79-year old woman snuggling a two-pound ball of black fluff on her shoulder. "He is such a little sweetheart," reads the note.

"That's what makes it all worthwhile," says Spurlin. "All I ever wanted was for the dogs to be loved. I always thought it was a neat idea, and if I loved them, other people would too."